



Finding the Right Words (Part 3)

distinguishing between similar words with slightly different meanings

a special publication from Firebelle Productions

It is sometimes difficult to choose the right words when similar words have different meanings. This is the third in a series of newsletters designed to help you distinguish between two or more similar words.

almost or most

Almost is an adverb meaning “nearly.” *Most* is an adjective meaning “the greatest quantity.” Do not use *most* to mean *almost* in formal writing. The first example below is faulty because only an adverb (*almost*) can be used to modify an adjective (*all*).

- Wrong:* *Most all* of my money was stolen.
Right: *Almost all* of my money was stolen.
Right: *Most* of my money was stolen.

amid, among, amongst, or between

Use *amid* when referring to something that cannot be counted.

We found the body *amid* (not *among*) the debris.

In general, use *between* when referring to two items and *among* when referring to three or more. (*Amongst* is chiefly a British expression. Use *among* instead.)

The responsibilities were divided *among* each person on the task force.

Most of the responsibility was divided *between* Jan and Bill.

Use *between* rather than *among* to show a relationship involving *three or more* persons or things when the items, considered individually rather than collectively, are linked to the others.

A lot of tension exists *between* the various gangs in our city.

Between fighting fires, writing books, and trying to run a business, I don't have much free time.

In general, use between when referring to two items and among when referring to three or more.



A fight broke out between Tony and Bernardo.

Tony and Bernardo were among several students suspended for fighting.

Between also means “in a space separating two points, objects, time periods, etc.”

The patient’s condition deteriorated *between* the time we arrived on scene and the time we were able to extricate her from the vehicle.

amount or number

Use *amount* when referring to the sum total of things in bulk or to a mass that *cannot* be counted. Use *number* when referring to the sum total of things that *can* be counted.

We can’t determine the *number* of victims still in the building because there is a large *amount* of debris blocking our access.

as or because

The word *as* may be used to mean “because,” “since,” “when,” or “while.” Therefore, you should not use *as* if the meaning may be vague or ambiguous.

Unclear: Diners started to panic *as* they noticed smoke coming from the kitchen.

Clear: Diners started to panic *because* they noticed smoke coming from the kitchen.

Clear: Diners started to panic *when* they noticed smoke coming from the kitchen.

because or since

The word *since* can be used to mean either “because” or “from then until now.” Therefore, its meaning can sometimes be ambiguous. If you mean *because* in sentences such as these, use it. That will eliminate the ambiguity.

Brice is limping *because* he injured his knee.

beside or besides

Beside and *besides* are both prepositions. *Beside* means “next to.” *Besides* means “in addition to” or “except.”

The maid found the gun *beside* the victim. She said she didn’t see or hear anything unusual *besides* the gunshot.

Besides is also an adverb meaning “furthermore, moreover, or also.”

Besides, there is nothing we can do for him now.

Use *amount* when referring to the sum total of things in bulk or to a mass that *cannot* be counted.

We’ve had a large amount of rain in the last three days.



Use *number* when referring to the sum total of things that *can* be counted.

The large number of rain-related accidents has taxed our resources.

bi- or semi- (annual, monthly, weekly)

The prefix *bi-* can mean either “twice each” or “every two.” Therefore, *biannual*, *bimonthly*, and *biweekly* can all cause confusion for readers. It is better to use the prefix *semi-* (for example, *semiannual*) when you mean “twice.” However, “twice each” or “every two” is ultimately less confusing than any prefix.

complement or compliment

Both *complement* and *compliment* can be used either as nouns or as verbs. *Complement* refers to completing something. *Compliment* refers to praise, commendation, or admiration.

The white gloves *complement* the Class A uniform nicely.

The chief *complimented* the crew on a job well done.

continual or continuous

Continual means “occurring regularly and repeatedly.” *Continuous* means “constantly, without interruption.”

We’ve had a *continual* stream of requests for sandbags.

Continuous rain over three days contributed to heavy flooding in the area.

fewer or less

Fewer refers to a smaller *number*. *Less* refers to a smaller *degree* or a smaller *amount*.

We need *fewer* police officers than do comparable cities our size because we have *less* crime.

Some experts say that *fewer* should be used for plural nouns (*fewer accidents, fewer crimes*) and that *less* should be used for singular mass nouns (*less smoke, less money*) and singular abstract nouns (*less crime, less violence*). However, *less than* is used (rather than *fewer than*) when referring to plural nouns expressed as a unitary measure (*less than 20 minutes, less than \$1000 dollars, less than 50 feet, less than 80 pounds*).

imply or infer

Imply means “to suggest.” *Infer* means “to assume or conclude.”

Shari *implied* that she had been sexually molested by her father when she was a baby.

Fewer refers to a smaller number.

We have fewer motorcycle officers than we did last year.



Less refers to a smaller degree or a smaller amount.

There is currently less interest in motorcycle patrol among our officers than there has been in the past.

We *inferred* from her comments that Shari's mother had known about the molestation, but did nothing to stop it.

incidence or incidents

Incidence refers to rate of occurrence. *Incidents* refers to individual events.

The high *incidence* of cancer may be linked to a hazardous materials *incident* we responded to in 1980.

liable or likely

Liable means "legally responsible" or "in danger of." *Likely* means "probably." *Liable* and *likely* are often used interchangeably when referring to probability. However, some experts insist that *liable* should be used in reference only to undesirable consequences.

You are *likely* to need help lifting the patient and *liable* to hurt yourself if you don't get some help.

ordinance or ordnance

An *ordinance* is a law, rule, or regulation. *Ordnance* refers to military weapons and ammunition.

Can we adopt an *ordinance* against transporting military *ordnance* through the city?

percent or percentage

Percent and *percentage* both refer to a rate or proportion per hundred. However, *percent* is used in conjunction with a number. *Percentage* is used with adjectives such as *large* and *small*, not with specific numbers.

Alcohol is a factor in a *large percentage* (over *60 percent*) of all fatal automobile accidents.

practicable or practical

Practicable means "feasible or capable of being put into practice." *Practical* means "useful or sensible." *Practicable* can be applied to objects, plans, and so forth, but not to people. *Practical* can be applied to both people (*a practical person*) and things.

It may not be *practicable* to evacuate everyone in the threat area. It may be more *practical* to direct everyone to shelter in place until the vapor cloud disperses.

***Incidence
refers to rate of
occurrence.***

***We must do
something about
the high
incidence of
crimes against
the homeless.***



***Incidents refers
to individual
events.***

***Two homeless
men were
attacked in
separate
incidents
last night.***

Note: Just because something is *practicable* (feasible) doesn't mean that it is *practical* (sensible).

precede or proceed

Precede means "to go before." *Proceed* means "to move or go forward."

John *preceded* me into the room.

We'll *proceed* on your signal.

toward or towards

Both *toward* and *towards* are acceptable, though *toward* is more common. Whichever one you choose, use it consistently.



Test Your Knowledge

In each of the sentences below, circle the word that is most correct.

1. The earthquake displaced a large amount/number of people.
2. There were fewer/less arrests for drunk driving this year than last.
3. "Your entire complement/compliment is en route," the dispatcher advised.
4. We found almost/most all of the victims before nightfall.
5. I didn't mean to imply/infer that I thought you started the fire on purpose.
6. The military ordinance/ordnance is stored at the south end of the complex.
7. Only a small percent/percentage of our firefighters have been trained to the hazmat technician level.
8. We've had several similar incidence/incidents lately.
9. Are you taking any other medications beside/besides nitroglycerin?
10. The suspected preceded/proceeded to run in the opposite direction.

***Precede means
"to go before."***

***Engine 15's crew
preceded the
truck company
into the fire.***



***Proceed means
"to move or go
forward."***

***Have Engine 15's
crew proceeded
with search and
rescue operations***

Check Your Answers

The following are answers to the quiz on the previous page.

1. The earthquake displaced a large number of people.
2. There were fewer arrests for drunk driving this year than last.
3. “Your entire complement is en route,” the dispatcher advised.
4. We found almost all of the victims before nightfall.
5. I didn’t mean to imply that I thought you started the fire on purpose.
6. The military ordnance is stored at the south end of the complex.
7. Only a small percentage of our firefighters have been trained to the hazmat technician level.
8. We’ve had several similar incidents lately.
9. Are you taking any other medications besides nitroglycerin?
10. The suspected proceeded to run in the opposite direction.



For More Information

This newsletter is adapted from Chapter 10 of *Take Command of Your Writing* by Jill Meryl Levy. *Take Command of Your Writing* is the first comprehensive guide to more effective writing geared specifically for emergency services personnel. It is an essential resource for anyone who wants to present ideas more effectively, write more accurate reports, and create more readable and user-friendly documents of any kind. It is also an excellent tool for anyone who wants to place higher on promotional exams requiring any kind of writing exercise.

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**Likely means
“probably.”**

**The dog is likely
to bite you.**



**Liabile and likely
are often used
interchangeably
when referring to
probability,
although liable
more correctly
means “legally
responsible” or
“in danger of.”**

**You are liable
to get bit.**